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Medical Topography
of Louisiana

James J. Cosby

admitted March 8th 1819

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Medical Topography of Louisiana.

Louisiana is less known than any part of the United States. It requires but a superficial view to convince the observer that its future destiny must be elevated.

The fertility of its soil, the luxuriance of its productions, the mild temperature of climate, the advantages of its situation in a commercial point of view, all warrant the most favorable anticipations of its future wealth and respectability. These high expectations have been in part realized, and the rising prosperity of the country, proves that they are, at no distant date, to be fully accomplished.

Men of science, unsatisfied with the superficial accounts given by Travellers, have made the minutiae of its history, the object of research, and thus have developed many important and interesting facts with regard to it.

It is not permitted me here, nor is this the proper place to enter into these matters, but I may be allowed, previously to entering on an account of the diseases of the country, to make a few observations on its physical history, which I deem indispensable.

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I commence with some remarks on the annual inundation of the Mississippi. The Nile of America, it is the fountain of fertility and plenty, as also the fruitful source of disease and death. It commences rising about the middle of February or first of March. It then continues to rise irregularly until the first of June, at which time, it begins to subside and in two or three weeks, is at its ordinary height. The planters have secured themselves against its inroads by artificial banks or levees. In many places, however, these precautions have not been taken, the lands being uncultivated, and there the river extends itself for miles on each side, exhibiting the appearance of an ocean.

The country being low and flat to a considerable extent, the streams which pass through it, are of course sluggish and tardy. When the river rises, these streams are acted on by the back water from it, and swell above their banks; thus filling numberless lakes, ponds, marshes &c, for twenty or thirty miles into the interior of the country. The waters subsiding in June,

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these marshes, ponds &c are left exposed to the action of the sun, whose powerful rays acting on this immense alluvion of vegetable mould, and the decaying remains of animals, with countless myriads of animalcula, must produce great impurity in the atmosphere, and widely disseminate the causes of disease.

The soil on the river, is mostly alluvial and fertile beyond description. So its cultivator, it yields in rich abundance, all the productions of a southern climate. Sugar, cotton, maize, rice &c, grow luxuriantly, and every culinary vegetable which has been attended to, succeeds well.

In no country in the world is there a wider field for botanizing, or more ample encouragement to the industrious Physician, to explore "Nature's Laboratory" in search of remedies suited to the "gigantic forms of disease." The forest growth is magnificent and embraces a vast number of trees, shrubs &c, a catalogue of which may be found in books on the subject.* Our Magnolia Grandiflora has been the object of

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pleasing admiration to every traveller. In the dead of winter its dark green leaves bid defiance to the northern blast, and early in the spring, its large, white and beautiful flowers, communicate a delicious fragrance to the air, and give an appearance of richness and grandeur to the forest.

The Liriodendron Tulipifera is, when seen growing to a very large size and raising its majestic head far above all others.

General Temperature of the Climate.

The approach of spring is discernable about the middle of February. At this time the southern breezes, accompanied by a mild serenity of weather, call forth the dormant germ of vegetation, and Nature again assumes her green and flowery mantle. February in Louisiana, nearly corresponds with April here.

The south wind continues to prevail in March, often accompanied with copious showers. This is commonly a very stormy month. The winds sometimes shift to the North and North-west, becoming sharp

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and chilly and often injuring gardens; sometimes doing serious damage to cotton crops.

April is usually a very pleasant month. The southwardly winds increase, as does also the heat; the nights are however, quite cool in this month.

In May, the heat increases and is sometimes uncomfortable. The winds shift more to the east and west; vegetation advances rapidly to maturity, and culinary articles are now in the height of perfection.

In June, the temperature is much increased; the heat in the day is unpleasant, though the nights are still cool. This month is commonly dry. Vegetation often suffers for want of rain.

July is appropriately hot; and were it not for the increased frequency of showers, vegetation would often suffer. The heavy night-dews are also of great service to the crops. The rains in July are usually preceded and accompanied with loud and repeated peals of thunder, and vivid flashes of lightning.

The months of August, September and October, are

are of nearly equal temperature. Throughout the whole summer and fall the nights continue cool and pleasant. The heat of the sun through the day, exhales immense quantities of aqueous vapour, which in the evening, falling in the form of dew, abstracts the heat and communicates a refreshing coolness to the air. These dews are astonishingly heavy, whitening in the morning, the appearance of a shower of rain.

The deep and thick fogs on the Mississippi, have excited the wonder of Northern Travellers. These "low hung vapors, motionless and still", collecting in the evening, remain during the night undisturbed by a breath of air, but so soon as the morning sun calls forth the breeze, they may be seen rising above the surface of the water in clouds, and by 9 o'clock, no trace of them remains. They are frequently of such density as to render it impossible to distinguish, so large a body as a boat, through them, at the distance of forty yards.

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The evenings in October are delightful. There is commonly less rain in this month than in any other, but the dews are heavier. In this month the planters commence gathering their Cotton. This plant grows from four to six feet in height. Its large and branching limbs are covered with broad leaves which retain the moisture from the dew for many hours; even until Eleven or twelve Oclock. The lower extremities of those engaged in gathering the cotton are, therefore kept wet, while the rest of the body is covered with sweat.

November, December and January are of nearly equal temperature, being cool, but seldom cold. Snow is rarely seen so low as New Orleans. Frost is also uncommon. In the upper, or Northern part of the State, I have never seen a winter without more or less snow, but the influence of the sun soon dissolves it. It may not be amiss to state the heat as indicated by the Thermometer. On the tenth of May 1815 the Thermometer was at 87.° and often during the summer is as high as 100.° The mean temperature of summer may be stated at from 87.° to 90.° and very frequently 95.°

In winter the Thermometer ranges from 40° to 50° and often 56°. The winter of 1817-18 is said to have been the most severe ever experienced in the Southern Country, which is somewhat remarkable, as it had the opposite character here. After these observations on the inundation of the Mississippi, it is perhaps needless to enlarge on them as the efficient causes of disease. In a country in which settlements are so rapidly made, in which each settler is anxious to possess himself of the most productive spot and to extend his farm as rapidly as possible, we need scarcely say that in this way very great quantities of vegetable matter are exposed to the putrefactive process. These then afford a fruitful hot-bed of corruption, from which emanate the miasmatic agents of disease and death.

I might now proceed to say something of the diseases of the country, but there is yet one extensive agent in their production, which I have not seen any where noticed, yet it is well known by the Inhabitants to be a frequent cause of complaint. The cotton planters are in the habit of ginning (that is, of taking the seeds from their cotton) in houses built for that purpose in the centre of their farms.

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These seeds are destructive to hogs if eaten before putrefaction, but after undergoing that process they are innocent and nutritious. Large piles of them are therefore heaped up in the open air, exposed to alternate rain and sunshine, and soon become putrefied. The stench which proceeds from them while in this situation, is peculiarly unpleasant and may be perceived at a great distance. In those who are not accustomed to it, it not unfrequently produces vomiting, on approaching too near the piles. The negroes, from habit, are unaffected by it. So sensible have the planters now become, of its deleterious influence, that they are careful to build their pen-houses as far as possible from their dwellings.

I am perfectly conscious of the imperfections of these remarks. Perhaps had it been permitted me to enlarge on the subjects on which I have merely touched, I might have been able to render them more satisfactory; but sensible of the necessity of brevity, I have contented myself with saying only what I thought indispensably necessary.

I shall now attempt a brief sketch of some of the diseases of the country, confining myself scrupulously to

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Diarrhœa.

This complaint most commonly makes its appearance among children in May or June. But it is not long confined to children; soon extending itself to all ages.
There are no peculiarities attending its first stage; if early attended to and judiciously treated, it is not difficult to remove. Perhaps it is more uniformly accompanied with fever and that of an inflammatory type, than is commonly noticed by systematic Writers on the subject. These demand for their cure more active application than ordinary. Called to a case on its first attack, it would almost always be proper to commence the treatment with venesection. ℞ or ℞ ii ℥ abstracted at first, have the effect of alleviating the severity of all the symptoms. Contemporaneously with this, an active Cathartic should be administered. This may be composed of Calomel, combined with Jalap or Rhubarb; the latter being preferable on account of its astringent powers. After these, it is common to resort to

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Diaphoretics; and of these the Dover's powders is best. This medicine seldom fails to do good unless when given before the inflammatory diathesis is removed. It has been administered however, with marked advantage where the state of the system would not seem to have indicated its use. If this fail, the cathartic or bleeding or both must be repeated and the same medicine again recurred to. When the disease is removed, it is proper to restore tone and vigor to the intestines by Tonics and astringents. Of the former, the Serri Rubigo is preferred; of the latter, there are many articles in daily use, among which, the Gum Kino is highly esteemed. I do not know that the root of the Dewberry or black berry has ever been tried in Louisiana, but as it is a remedy, the efficacy of which has been attested by high authority, & one which might be in the hands of all, it ought to be made known and recommended to those who are ignorant of its use.

Unfortunately this disease is too often considered of a trivial or unimportant nature, and the Physician

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is not consulted until immediate danger is threatened, or until such improper remedies have been used as to give it a complicated character of much more difficult management. No disease of our country becomes more intractable or obstinate than this, when allowed to assume a chronic form. In this shape, it often baffles all the resources of our art. A mercurial course has sometimes succeeded when all other means have failed. This occasional success has led too frequently to the practice of salivating early in the complaint. If mercury fail in a chronic patient, he is advised to travel. Within the last four years, a mineral spring has been discovered on Pearl River, 100 miles East of the Mississippi. It has now become the resort for patients from all parts of the States of Louisiana and Mississippi.

The waters of this Spring have never been subjected to chemical analysis: they are said to be chalybeate, which is probably the case. Being situated in a high, healthy country, possibly part of its celebrity

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may be attributable to this cause. Change of scenery, mode of living &c may also be taken into the account. It matters not, however, what are the efficient causes, provided the disease be removed. Unquestionably many have derived signal advantage from a visit to this spring.

Often after every remedy has been tried, we have the mortification to find the disease still remaining, and our patient gradually wasting, as if in consumption, until eventually hectic supervenes, and he dies.

Dysentery.

This very painful and obstinate complaint makes its appearance commonly in the latter part of June or in July. Sometimes not until August, and in 1815, it prevailed as late as September. In this season, it succeeds so immediately after Diarrhoea, that the latter appears to step into the former, giving apparent reason for the Theory of some, that they are the same in Nature, differing only in degree. Whether this be so or not, I do not now stop to enquire; but merely observe that the supposition does not necessarily lead to erroneous practice, as

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the remedies for both are the same in the first stage. This, however, is liable to many exceptions. The treatment will be varied by the season in which the disease appears. When it appears in the Spring or early part of the Summer, it is uniformly attended with fever of an Intermittent type; as it appeared in the Autumn of 1816, the fever was continued and in most instances, had an evident Typhoid tendency. The attendance of Intermittent fever, has often led, among the ignorant, to an erroneous, and indeed, pernicious practice. Believing the fever to be the primary disease and the Dysentery only to be an attendant symptom, they have first exhibited an emetic to prepare the Stomach, and then commenced with Bark. This mistake, has in many instances, done much harm. When the disease is better understood and more properly managed, it is not very difficult to remove it. Venesection is here more imperiously, and extensively demanded than in Diarrhoea. (It will be observed that I speak of Dysentery as it occurs in

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the spring and summer. We ought to take advantage of the susceptibility of the system induced by bleeding, to enforce other remedies. Calomel and Rhubarb form the best purge. This should be repeated, until the bowels are well cleansed. The rule "to purge until the stools become natural" is a very good one, but there are certainly many exceptions to it. My acquaintance with this disease, which is certainly very limited, has convinced me of the fact, that in most of the bowel affections, we purge infinitely too much.+ After thoroughly cleansing the bowels, I would resort to diaphoretics. This class of remedies have been almost totally overlooked in the treatment of this disease in Louisiana. This, however, is far from proving that they have been tried and found inefficacious. In the devotion of practitioners to one remedy (mercury) they have neglected all others.
The use of diaphoretics is sanctioned by the highest authorities. The names of Richter and Stancide are among those of its advocates. Dover's powder merits our first attention. This admirable compound seems capable

+ Dr. Chapman.

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of filling many indications. It allays the irritation and soothes the pains of the bowels, and produces relaxation and moisture on the internal surface. It alone, if judiciously administered, after the bowels have been brought to a proper state, often succeeds in effecting a cure. It would not be proper, however, to depend on it alone. It should be aided by Doses, until the tone and healthy action of the stomach and intestines be perfectly restored.
This is the mode of treatment in an ordinary case, and under the circumstances mentioned, is commonly successful; but far different is the state of things, if these means have been neglected, until the disease becomes confirmed. It then becomes one of the most difficult and unmanageable cases with which the Practitioner has to contend. Salivation is most generally resorted to and sometimes with success. Almost every possible mode of treatment has been, at one time or other, attempted. Directly opposite plans have sometimes succeeded in apparently similar cases, and all have often failed. The medicinal spring before named, is said to have benefitted some, whose cases appeared to be

remedies. In the fall Dysentery of 1846, which, as observed before, was attended with fever of Typhoid tendency, venesection was forbidden. Purging was as much demanded and as serviceable as in any other form; and the use of diaphoretics was found pre-eminently beneficial.

Many cases which obstinately refused to yield to any mode of treatment, gave way gradually to the change of season, and as the winter came on, they disappeared.

This opening subject would admit of many more observations, but I pass them on and come to speak of,

Bilious Fever.

All our Fevers derive more or less of this character, but I here confine myself to the Bilious Autumnal Fever, which rarely fails to visit us in September and to continue to prevail until the approach of cold weather in November. I say nothing of the cause of this Fever. It is so well known as to render any observations on it here utterly superfluous.

The subject of an attack can generally foretel its approach, 8 or 10 hours, or even much longer.

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cannot overcome. His eyes are heavy and offended by light. He has pain in the head and back. The muscles of his legs are sore as if he had been taking hard exercise. Most immediately before the attack, the pain in the head increases violently. The eyes become inflamed, swollen and extremely sensible to the light. The stomach is much affected. Sometimes there is chill, but this is by no means uniform. Being highly inflammatory, it would seem at first view that bleeding would be necessary, but this is rarely the case. It has been tried again and again, and the current of opinion is now generally against it. It however, yet has its advocates. In the Autumn of 1818 I myself suffered an attack, and the premonitory symptoms were unusually violent. The pain in the head was excruciating, the affection of the stomach extremely distressing. I was speedily relieved by the remedies I shall presently mention; venesection was not used. Since my arrival in Philadelphia, I have had another attack, evidently of the same nature, and the same remedies were used, but it was found necessary to bleed me 36 ℔, at three bleedings, before the symptoms had abated.

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The first thing then to be done, is to attend to the state of the stomach and bowels. These are to be evacuated either by an emetic followed by a cathartic, or by a combination of both, which is the mode, in most instances, preferable. Calomel, Jalap and Ipecacuan, in proper proportions, form an excellent emetico-cathartic. A late writer speaking of this disease, observes that where there were rigors, pains in the back, small, weak pulse, constricted skin &c, he gave Nitrous Ether and Spts: Ammonia: aiding their operation by warm drinks. After this stage was passed and the pulse rose, he bled largely and with the effect, it appears, of removing all these symptoms. What respective, might in some cases, have such effects I cannot doubt, but that the same might be produced by an emetic or the combination named before, I can declare from personal experience. After the bowels have been thoroughly evacuated, the Antimonial diaphoretics are resorted to with great benefit. These, with the occasional administration of small portions of neutral salts, to keep the bowels soluble, are generally sufficient to effect a cure. In this however, as in all other cases, strict attention should be paid to diet.

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Omitting to say any thing more on this disease, I pass to the consideration of the Epidemic which prevailed so destructively in New Orleans, and up the river as high as Natchez, in the fall of 1817. I regret that I am not in possession of accounts in which I can confide, as to the precise mode of attack and the general plan of treatment in N. Orleans. From my knowledge of the views of practitioners in that city with regard to Yellow Fever, I am pretty confident that early salivation was resorted to. Of the success of the practice, we may form an idea by a reference to their daily or weekly bills of mortality.

We in St. Francisville a village in one of the Northern Parishes, heard of the sufferings of our fellow citizens & commiserated them, while we reposed in fancied security, unconscious that the pale destroyer was about to interrupt and destroy our peace. At length we heard of some case in Baton Rouge 150 miles below us. These excited much alarm and soon we found there was but too much ground for our fears. The terrific footsteps of the monster were traced up the river, gradually

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approaching our village and soon his ravages commenced.
The first case which appeared among us were marked by some peculiarities both in character and treatment which were interesting. Of these I shall only mention two.
The first person affected among us was a man of 45. robust and rather plethoric. He had spent the early part of the day on the wharf. Immediately after dinner, at which he had drunk a quantity of claret, he was seized with violent vomiting.
An apothecary at hand, gave him 20 gtt. of Laudanum; this aggravated the puking. He then took some warm water, after which he vomited with more ease, but it still continued, until he was much exhausted. At 7 in the evening, he was very weak, had considerable fever and some mental affection. He was ordered 4 grs. of Calomel with ½ a grain of opium, every two hours, and to have the mercurial friction twice a day. Being extremely weak he was ordered brandy and water occasionally.
This course was continued thirty six hours. At this time his mental aberration was considerable and his fever

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much increased. There was a singular wildness in the expression of his countenance. His Physician was now alarmed by discovering a twitching of the muscles of his face and a starting of the tendons of the fingers. Scarcely had he time to form a conjecture as to the cause of this, when a violent convulsion came on, which continued twenty minutes. In 9 hours he had eight of these. During this time, he was repeatedly put into the warm bath, but without apparent advantage, and he finally sunk exhausted and almost lifeless to sleep. After a few hours repose, he awoke refreshed. His mind was more composed than it had been, and he was more free from fever. The mercury was discontinued as was also the brandy. He was ordered Volat: Alkali and wine in small quantities at first, but gradually increased. Under this treatment he slowly recovered & by the aid of Tonics his health was perfectly restored.
This case was singular, as there was not one evacuation by medicine, during its violence.
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cannot be determined, but from the success of the latter mode of treatment in analogous cases, we are warranted in supposing the recovery would have been more speedy. One other case will be all I shall notice.

A Gentleman of 50, who was engaged in discharging a boat from the wharf, was taken suddenly with violent pain in the head accompanied with great gastric disturb. Having an insuperable objection to Mercury and fearing the Physician in town, he sent for an old Practitioner in the country, whose opposition to that medicine was well known. Finding his patient with strong full pulse, great heat of surface and much mental derangement, he ordered him Jalap and Ipecac combined. For his enmity to Mercury was so great that he refused to use it even as a purgative. This was repeated three times and the patient was kept on a strictly antiphlogistic regimen. The nitrous powders (excluding the calomel) were not used. He was purged with neutral salts every two or three days, and under this treatment the disease was in a short time removed. The system was then restored to its usual vigor by the

use of bitters and nutritious diet. Here not one grain of mercury was used. From the age and constitution of the patient, and the violence of the attack, the prognosis appeared extremely unfavourable, yet the recovery was more speedy than in any case in which early salivation was attempted.

Having carefully noted down a number of cases, with their various modes of treatment, I might now go on to detail them, but I know not that any advantage would accrue from it, I therefore omit it. The disease merely seemed to pause in its progress, at St. Francisville, and then passed on to Natchez, where it continued its devastating ravages till the commencement of cold weather.

A comparison between the cases of this horrible disease treated with and those without mercury, would not terminate satisfactorily to those who are enthusiastically devoted to it. Let it not be supposed that I am opposed to the use of mercury in all cases. Such is far from being the fact. I have too often witnessed its good effects not to know that in many instances it is the angel of deliverance from disease and

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death. In all our bilious complaints, as well as in many others, I believe it to be the very best cathartic we have.
But used indiscriminately in all cases and in all stages of disease, particularly with a view to its salivant powers. I am very sure that it has often produced effects highly deleterious and ruinous. To deny this, would be to deny the powers of the article; for can it do otherwise than injure when wielded by the hands of ignorance & rashness?
It is the curse of Louisiana to be infested by a race of creatures calling themselves Physicians, whose only object is aggrandizement. In this ruling passion all others are buried. Their first object then is to attain the character of performing the most speedy cures.
Does a case of Diarrhoea, Dysentery, Bilious Fever or indeed almost any other disease, present itself to them? Very probably their first step will be to salivate.
To ask their theories as to the operation of the medicine, would be unchaste to subject our feelings to insult. They deride all Theory. They only know that mercury

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acts powerfully on the human system, and with this knowledge, they proceed fearlessly and audaciously to administer it. In this way, thousands have fallen victims to one of the best of medicines.

Those who are acquainted with the state of medical science in the greater part of the State of Louisiana and the Mississippi, will not charge me with harshness or unmeaning severity.

The evil is the more galling as there is no prospect of its removal. The Legislature of Louisiana, conscious of the mischiefs and abuses arising from this source, wisely endeavoured to put a stop to it, but all attempts hitherto have proved abortive. The evil still exists, and must continue to exist until the public shall have become so far enlightened as to see their danger and their interest.

The preference given to such men, is mentioned by Dr. Rush, as one of the causes of vexation to the enlightened Physician. True it is so. But this should only stimulate him to greater efforts. To guard against

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While pursuing this course, although the world may frown, although the pitiless storms of adversity or misfortune may beat upon him, he will still enjoy within his own bosom a peace of mind, of which neither the envy, malice or ingratitude of man can deprive him.

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